

ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT OF LEARNERS OF SPECIAL PROGRAM IN SPORTS

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Abstract

This study wanted to determine the factors affecting academic engagement in the Special Program in Sports (SPS) at one public junior high school in Northern Negros during the 2025-2026 academic year. The researcher employed a descriptive design and stratified, proportionate random sampling to collect data from 82 of 104 learners, representing various grades, sexes, and sport types. A researcher-developed questionnaire was used, yielding a content validity index of 0.87 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.896. Descriptive statistics (mean, rank, and standard deviation) and inferential tests (Mann-Whitney U, ANOVA, and Pearson's r) were applied at a 0.05 significance level. Results showed high levels of academic engagement in personal habits and external support systems, with no significant differences by sex or sport type.

Keywords: Special Program in Sports (SPS), Academic Engagement, Student-Athletes, Descriptive-Correlational Study, Personal Habits, External Support Systems, Junior High School Education.

Introduction

Academic engagement refers to the mental effort and behavioral investment students put into schoolwork (Alrashidi et al., 2016).

Internationally, studies show that athletic programs can improve student discipline and resilience (O'Neil et al., 2020). Research by Gayles and Crandall (2019) notes that sports engagement often strengthens time management and goal-setting. Supporting this, Tubic et al. (2025) found that sustained training engagement leads to better academic results and higher school involvement. Ultimately, global evidence suggests that athletes succeed in both areas when provided with a supportive institutional framework (Peker, 2024).

In Asia, the pressure to balance these roles often leads to stress and burnout (Ellul, 2024). Studies in the region highlight that a "supportive ecosystem" is the main factor in keeping student-athletes motivated (Liu & Taresh, 2024). Institutional support and a positive coaching climate enable students to maintain high academic standards while remaining committed to sports training (Rahmat and Zulkifli, 2022).

International and Asian research shows that training and academics are cohesive. While global data indicates that athletic discipline improves performance, Asian studies emphasize that a strong support system is vital to prevent burnout. Together, these findings prove that student-athletes flourish in flexible, encouraging environments.

In the Philippines, sports involvement has been shown to improve academic results. Jaspe et al. (2024) found that athletic satisfaction directly enhances academic resilience, while Juezan and Osorno (2024) noted that sports engagement fosters discipline that carries over to schoolwork. However, these benefits are tested by public school conditions, particularly within the Special Program in Sports (SPS). While the program aims for holistic development, practical implementation in local settings creates unique difficulties for students.

A significant research gap exists regarding how student-athletes stay engaged within local public-school settings. This is especially true for the SPS, which faces challenges like its recent implementation, mixed-grade classes, and frequent schedule disruptions. Additionally, limited

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resources and a shortage of dedicated coaches make it harder for students to balance sports and academics, potentially hurting their overall performance.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the factors affecting the training and academic engagement of learners in Special Program in Sports (SPS) in one of the public junior high schools in Northern Negros for the academic year 2025-2026.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of academic engagement of the learners in SPS in terms of personal habits, and external support systems when taken as a whole and grouped according to the aforementioned variables?
2. Is there a significant difference in the level of academic engagement of learners in SPS in terms of personal habits and external support systems when grouped according to the aforementioned variables?

Hypotheses

Given the above-stated problems, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is no significant difference in the level of academic engagement of learners in SPS in terms of psychological motivation, social support, and environmental resources when grouped according to:
 - a. sex,
 - b. grade level, and
 - c. type of sports.

Methods/Theory/Calculation

This study aimed to explore the factors affecting academic performance of learners enrolled in SPS in one of the public junior high schools in Northern Negros for the Academic Year 2025-2026.

This study used a descriptive research design to examine the academic engagement of SPS students in one of the junior high schools in Northern Negros. The variable was academic engagement influenced by personal habits and external support systems. A descriptive design, defined by Ary et al. (2019), is a research method applied to describe and summarize the essential characteristics of the participants and the phenomena under investigation as they naturally exist, without manipulating any variables. In this study, it was applied to describe and summarize the participants' characteristics based on personal habits and external support systems in academics.

Statistical Treatment

The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to provide a comprehensive evaluation of academic engagement among Special Program in Sports (SPS) learners. Descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation, were utilized to identify the most prevalent factors and summarize engagement levels across several key dimensions: personal habits and external support systems. These measures offered critical insights into the central tendency and distribution of students' experiences within the program.

To ensure the validity of the comparative analysis, normality testing was first conducted to determine whether the data met parametric assumptions. For group comparisons where normality was not satisfied, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was employed to evaluate differences between two independent groups, such as sex. For comparisons involving three or more groups, such as grade level and type of sport, the One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was applied where appropriate. These methods allowed for a reliable assessment of how engagement varies across different demographic and athletic profiles.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Level of Academic Engagement of the Learners in SPS

Grouping Variable	Personal Habits			External Support Systems		
	M	VI	SD	M	VI	SD
A. As a Whole	4.31	H	0.39	4.33	H	0.40
B. Sex						
Male	4.34	H	0.40	4.30	H	0.43
Female	4.24	H	0.39	4.32	H	0.35
C. Grade level						
Grade 7	4.39	H	0.32	4.62	VH	0.29
Grade 8	4.34	H	0.42	4.29	H	0.43

Grade 9		4.10	H	0.43		4.16	H	0.47
D. Type of Sports								
Individual/Dual		4.27	H	0.36		4.24	H	0.44
Team		4.33	H	0.42		4.41	H	0.35

Note: 1.00-1.49- Very Low (VL); 1.50-2.49- Low (L); 2.50-3.49- Average (A); 3.50-4.49 – High(H); 4.50-5.00- Very High (VH)

Table 1 presents that when taken as a whole, learners in SPS demonstrated a high level of academic engagement in both personal habits and external support systems, with means ranging from 4.31 to 4.33. In terms of personal habits, sex, grade level, and type of sports, have high levels of academic engagement, with means ranging from 4.10 to 4.39. In terms of external support systems, sex and type of sports have high levels of academic engagement. When grouped according to grade level, grades 8 and 9 have high levels of academic engagement; however, grade 7 has a very high level of academic engagement with a mean of 4.62. The *SD* shows homogeneity in respondents' responses, ranging from 0.29 to 0.47.

The findings indicate that learners in the SPS program maintain a high level of academic engagement across personal habits and external support systems.

The results indicating high academic engagement in both personal habits and external support systems are consistent with previous research highlighting the significance of these factors for student success and are strongly supported by Wang et al. (2019), who found that a holistic support system involving parents, teachers, and peers is a primary driver in

enhancing student motivation and school engagement. Furthermore, the high scores in personal habits are explained by the findings of Jerez (2024), which identify self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation as potential predictors of academic achievement. The research suggests that students who possess elevated confidence in their ability to study - much like the SPS learners - are more likely to perform better and persist in their academic goals. Finally, the "very high" level of engagement specifically noted in Grade 7 learners aligns with the developmental perspectives of Fredricks et al. (2016). Their work suggests that younger learners tend to report higher levels of engagement and responsiveness to external support as they transition into new educational contexts, whereas older students may experience a slight shift in how they perceive and interact with these support systems.

Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of the Learners in SPS

The sixth objective of the study was to determine whether there is a significant difference in the level of academic engagement of learners in SPS across sex, grade level, and type of sports. The results are presented in tables 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U test Results for the Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS When Grouped According to Sex

Factors	Group	n	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U Test			
					U-ratio	W	Z	p
External Support Systems	Male	56	42.59	2379.50	672.500	1023.500	-.554	.579
	Female	26	39.37	1023.50				

Table 2 shows no significant difference in the level of academic engagement of learners.

These findings suggest that regardless of sex, learners exhibit similar levels of academic engagement related to external support systems.

This lack of overall difference aligns with the findings of Turhan (2020), whose meta-analysis on academic motivation found the overall effect of gender to be negligible (slightly favoring females), who cautioned that the effect of gender on motivation varied significantly across different

student sample groups (e.g., age groups, school types), suggesting that the relationship is highly context-dependent. This is further examined by Ranjeeth et al. (2020), who provided a comparative analysis of secondary students and noted that academic outcomes are shaped by a variety of external parameters, such as the impact of advisors and time spent on sports, which can affect male and female students similarly within a structured educational setting. However, this result presents a contrast to Parajuli and Thapa (2017), who found significant gender differences in academic performance, with female students outperforming

their male counterparts. The consistency found in the current study suggests that the SPS program's external support systems - including coaching, academic advising, and specialized facilities - act as

an equalizing force that sustains high engagement for both male and female student-athletes.

Table 3: t-test Results for the Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS in Terms of Personal Habits When Grouped According to Sex

Factor	Group	Mean	SD	df	t-ratio	p
Personal Habits	Male	4.34	0.40	49.5	1.060	.291
	Female	4.24	0.39			

Table 3 shows no significant difference in the level of academic engagement of SPS learners regarding personal habits, by sex ($t(49.5) = 1.06, p = .291$).

This means that both male and female learners exhibit similar personal habits related to their academic engagement.

This finding is consistent with Ranjeeth et al. (2020), whose large-scale analysis of secondary students revealed that personal habits - such as time management for study and physical exercise - are critical parameters of academic performance that can show no significant variance between genders when students are under similar advisory systems.

This suggests that the structured routine of the SPS program may harmonize the daily habits of its learners. However, this finding runs contrary to Luitel (2024), who argued that female students often exhibit fundamentally stronger intrinsic motivation and engagement habits. Ultimately, as suggested by Kessels et al. (2016), while gendered expectations often persist in general education, the actual behaviors and habits contributing to engagement remain uniform across this specialized student-athlete population, likely due to the rigorous time-management demands placed on all athletes regardless of sex.

Table 4: ANOVA Results for the Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS When Grouped According to Grade Level

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-ratio	p
Personal Habits	Between Groups	1.128	2	0.56	3.79*	.027
	Within Groups	11.74	79	0.14		
	Total	12.87	81			
External Support Systems	Between Groups	1.17	2	0.58	3.77*	.027
	Within Groups	12.29	79	0.15		
	Total	13.47	81			

* $p < .05$

Table 4 shows the results for significant differences in learners' academic engagement in SPS, grouped by grade level.

The academic engagement across grade levels ($F(2, 79) = 3.79, p = .027$) for personal habits implies a significant difference. Similarly, for external support systems ($F(2, 79) = 3.77, p = .027$), a significant difference was found. Since there is a significant difference, there is a need to conduct a Post Hoc Analysis.

The result was supported by the study of Lei et al. (2018), which found that learners who stay engaged in their schoolwork tend to do better academically through time management and external support. This finding is further reinforced by the

developmental perspective of Van Hecke et al. (2016), who noted that younger learners (such as those in Grade 7) typically show peak engagement levels due to the novelty of the program and their higher reliance on immediate external support. As students transition to higher grades, Wu et al. (2024) observed that engagement often fluctuates as personal habits become more individualized and the student-athlete begins to navigate more complex academic and athletic pressures. The significant difference identified here suggests that the SPS program's support systems and the students' own study habits are most effectively aligned during the earlier grade levels, creating a distinct "engagement gap" as students' progress through the curriculum.

Table 5: Post Hoc Analysis for the Significant Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS in Terms of Psychological Motivation and Environmental Resources

Areas	Grade Level	Grade Level	Mean Difference	p
Personal Habits	Grade 7	Grade 8	.04974	.870
		Grade 9	.29014*	.024
	Grade 8	Grade 9	.24041	.094
External Support Systems	Grade 7	Grade 8	.16813	.226
		Grade 9	.29507*	.025
	Grade 8	Grade 9	.12694	.523

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 5 shows significant differences in the level of academic engagement in terms of personal habits and external support systems between Grade 7 and Grade 9, with Grade 7 demonstrating significantly higher academic engagement in personal habits and external support systems compared to Grade 9 learners, while no significant differences exist between Grades 7 and 8 or Grades 8 and 9.

This is consistent with the findings of Van Hecke et al. (2016), who noted that younger adolescents in the Grade 7 age group often show peak engagement due to the novelty of the program and their higher receptivity to the institutional environment. Furthermore, regarding external support systems, the perceived gap in support found in Grade 9 aligns

with the research of Wu et al. (2024), which suggests that as student-athletes move toward the end of their junior high cycle, their trajectories of engagement often dip as they encounter higher athletic demands and a greater need for academic independence. As Aromolaran (2021) notes, while supports may remain stable, the proactive involvement required to sustain engagement often tapers off by Grade 9. These findings collectively suggest that while the SPS program provides a strong foundation in Grade 7, there is a natural and documented "engagement dip" as students reach Grade 9, highlighting a critical window for targeted intervention to maintain the high habits and support levels seen at the start of the program.

Table 6: Mann-Whitney U test Results for the Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS When Grouped According to Type of Sports

Factors	Group	n	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U Test			
					U-ratio	W	Z	p
Personal Habits	Individual/Dual Team	37	39.42	1458.50	755.500	1458.500	-.719	.472
		45	43.21	1944.50				

Table 6 shows no significant difference in learners' academic engagement in SPS regarding personal habits, when grouped by type of sport ($U = 755.500$, $p = .472$).

This means that learners participating in individual/dual sports and those in team sports exhibit similar personal habits related to their academic engagement.

This is supported by Christino et al. (2023), who found that while team sport athletes may experience different social support dynamics, these differences do not necessarily translate into divergent academic study habits. This finding is further reinforced by Pluhar et al. (2019), who noted that while individual

athletes might be more goal-oriented and team athletes more socially driven, both groups are required to maintain high levels of self-discipline to succeed. Furthermore, although Niyonsenga et al. (2021) observed that individual athletes often face higher competition anxiety, the results of this study suggest that such psychological variations do not disrupt the formation of consistent academic personal habits. The lack of significant difference implies that the SPS program's academic framework successfully imposes a uniform standard of discipline and time management that transcends the specific psychological demands of different sport categories.

Table 7: t-Test Results for the Difference in the Level of Academic Engagement of Learners in SPS in Terms of External Support Systems When Grouped According to Type of Sports

Factor	Group	Mean	SD	df	t-ratio	p
External Support Systems	Individual/Dual Team	4.24	.44	68.60	.82	.067
		4.41	.35			

Table 7 shows no significant difference in the level of academic engagement of learners in SPS in terms of external support systems when grouped according to the type of sports ($t = 0.82, p = 0.067$).

This means that learners participating in individual/dual sports and those in team sports have similar perceptions of external support systems related to their academic engagement.

This finding is supported by Barth et al. (2018), who highlighted that athlete support programs tend to integrate both individual and collective approaches, providing structured support that benefits athletes regardless of their sport type. This is further reinforced by Deci and Ryan (2017), whose Self-Determination Theory suggests that the basic psychological need for relatedness and support is universal; therefore, the external encouragement provided by the SPS program is felt equally by all athletes. Additionally, as noted by Gustafsson (2016), a positive and "supportive climate" created by coaches and teachers acts as a protective factor for all student-athletes, helping to standardize the level of academic engagement across different sport categories. These insights explain why learners in both individual and team sports report similar perceptions of external support systems contributing to their academic engagement.

Summary

1. SPS learners demonstrate consistently high academic engagement through a combination of effective self-management and strong support from teachers, parents, and peers. This balance suggests the program successfully helps students navigate both their scholastic and athletic responsibilities.
2. While academic engagement remains uniform across sexes and sport types, significant variations emerge across grade levels, indicating that student habits and support needs shift as they mature. This suggests that developmental stages influence academic patterns more than gender or the specific nature of the sport.

Conclusion

1. SPS learners maintain strong academic engagement by balancing personal self-discipline with consistent support from their school and home communities.
2. These engagement patterns remain stable regardless of sex or sport type, though they evolve naturally as students progress through different grade levels.
3. SPS Learners should practice self-discipline and goal-setting while actively seeking guidance to balance their athletic and academic roles.
4. Coaches are encouraged to prioritize psychological motivation and emotional support alongside physical skill development.

5. SPS Coordinators should design holistic programs that provide mentoring and strengthen partnerships between parents, teachers, and coaches.

6. Teachers may offer flexible learning arrangements and consistent emotional encouragement to help student-athletes manage their dual responsibilities.

7. Parents should maintain a supportive home environment and communicate regularly with the school to reinforce their child's motivation.

8. School Administrators are encouraged to implement policies and invest in facilities that support both academic excellence and student well-being.

9. Future Researchers should conduct longitudinal or qualitative studies to further investigate the long-term factors that drive student-athlete success and balance.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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